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SUBJECT: Uruguay: Race to Lead Montevideo Bruises Ruling Coalition

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Summary

1. (SBU) Of all the offices to be contested in Uruguay's May 9 municipal elections, the position of intendente (a combination of governor and mayor) of Montevideo carries by far the greatest political weight. Montevideo's status as a bastion of ruling Frente Amplio (FA) coalition support, however, means that the governorship is decided less by the May 9 vote itself than by the preceding struggle to win the FA candidacy. That contest just concluded, offering a surprising result that saw the front runner, Socialist Daniel Martinez, fail to capitalize on his early advantage. He eventually lost the nomination to a compromise candidate, Communist Ana Olivera. Getting to that result resulted in some significant intra-FA dust-ups, which appear to have strengthened the small Communist Party at the expense of the Socialist Party. End Summary.

A Shoe-in, but which foot?

2. (U) After last year's primary, general and run-off elections, the May 9 municipal vote marks the fourth and final stage of Uruguay's five-year electoral cycle. Although the intendencia and departmental parliament of each of Uruguay's 19 departments are in contention, the greatest interest surrounds the question of who will become Montevideo's intendente, by far the most powerful and high profile of the departmental posts due to size and location. With high FA popularity levels, most observers believe that the FA's 20-year dominance of the post will continue after May. Attention has therefore been focused not on which party will win the post, but rather on whom the FA will nominate.

3. (U) Under Uruguayan law, each party contesting an intendencia is allowed to field up to three candidates, although in practice, strategy and resources determine the number of candidates that the political parties nominate. The district parliamentary seats are then allocated in proportion to the sum of votes each party gathers from its candidates, with the party attracting the most votes not only gaining the governorship, but a guaranteed 16 of the parliament's 30 seats. In the case of the FA's Montevideo campaign, a common assumption was that Daniel Martinez, a senator elect from the Socialist Party, would be the FA's principal candidate. Although Martinez failed in his bid for the FA's presidential nomination last year, he nevertheless commands wide support that the Socialist faction believed would easily translate

into a candidacy and consequently, the intendencia.

14. (U) On 25 January, the FA Montevideo Assembly (the 111 person body charged with selecting candidates) convened and announced that only one candidate would stand, a decision publically supported by both president elect Jose Mujica and vice president elect Danilo Astori. The expressed intent of this move was to avoid feeding the fierce factionalism that marred last year's battle for the presidential nomination. Problematically, neither Martinez (backed mainly by the Socialists and the Communists) nor Carlos Varela (backed by Mujica's Popular Participation Movement (MPP) and Astori's Asemblia Uruguay (AU) faction) seemed disposed to step aside. The mood of disunity deepened when some Socialists declared that they would continue to support Martinez even in the event that he failed to be selected. The situation did not improve when neither candidate secured the requisite 4/5 majority from the assembly; Varela gleaned a paltry 37 votes while Martinez fell short with a total of 60 votes.

Plan B?

15. (U) At this stage, unwilling to countenance Martinez as a candidate, but with Varela's campaign effectively dead in the water, leaders of the MPP and AU hustled to put Communist Party member and present Vice Minister of Social development Ana Olivera forward as a compromise candidate. The idea gained traction within the FA as the week progressed, although public support was less readily apparent; many viewed Olivera's emergence as the result of a backroom deal between the MPP and the Communist party. Still, it grew clear to delegates that Olivera represented the FA's best way forward, and on January 28 the committee reconvened and Olivera duly crossed the 90 vote threshold she needed to become the official candidate and probable intendente.

Pride before a fall?

16. (U) The fallout from Martinez's thwarted bid has left the internal structure of the FA somewhat bruised. The most immediate causalities are the Socialist party, many members of which were left angry at their failure to better position their candidate and asking themselves how they were so easily bested. Martinez had been promised the backing of the Socialist party, the Communists, and the important Vertiente Artiguista faction of the FA, and he also had the majority of the party base. A recent poll of FA supporters had given his candidacy 66 percent approval while Verela and Olivera had pulled in just 12 percent and 7 percent respectively. Others in the FA were swift to offer explanations for Martinez's implosion, most of which reflected the shift of power over the last two years within the FA from the Socialists to the further-left MPP and Communist parties. The mildest such explanation was that Martinez and his ilk had "already had their turn" governing Montevideo and that Martinez "doesn't really know" the city. Others cited the Socialist's "pride," alleged unwillingness to compromise, and apparent "distain" for the leadership of other factions as the source of their disappointment. Mujica's wife, Senator Lucia Topolansky, criticized the Socialists for having trumpeted Martinez as the FA candidate before the convention had even had a chance to discuss it.

Whodunnit?

17. (SBU) A broader view of the dust up, however, offers additional explanations that reflect lines of division generated by last year's fight for the presidential candidacy. Early on in the process of preparing for his campaign, Mujica tried to strike a deal with the Socialists, and is even rumored to have offered the role of vice president to Martinez as part of the bargain. The Socialists, however, went on to back Astori, and many suspect that as a consequence, Martinez's bid for the intendencia may have simply been vetoed by Mujica. By contrast, it has been noted that the Communist Party, which, while not always natural allies of the MPP, was the first to throw its weight behind Mujica's candidacy.

18. (SBU) Interestingly, Mujica may not have been the only player to favor a veto. Some feel Astori, despite the Socialists' support for his own candidacy, could have had a hand in Martinez's undoing. In Astori's case, however, the move could be preemptive as he is expected to make a presidential bid in the 2014 elections and may have been uneasy with a potential rival such as Martinez elevated to the very public platform of Montevideo's intendencia. In any case, Astori's failure to support Martinez will sour his relations with the Socialists, further reducing his less-than-robust support within the FA.

A Positive Spin

19. (U) There is little doubt that the Socialists have been given a very public knock. Some party members argue, however, that while

their standing within the coalition has been negatively impacted, their standing with electorate remains unscathed. Even more optimistic individuals, buoyed by the 60 percent support Martinez pulled in from the party base, assert that Martinez's "vetoing" actually places him and the socialist party in a stronger position for 2014. In contrast, the less sanguine elements of the party feel that it is difficult to frame the loss of Martinez's nomination as anything other than wasted opportunity. Many Socialists have concluded the party pushed Martinez's candidacy too hard and that it is suffering politically as a consequence.

Ana Olivera: Biographic information

10. (U) Fifty-six year old Ana Olivera is currently the Vice Minister for Social Affairs (MIDES), but she has worked steadily, albeit relatively anonymously, for the FA in various capacities (including, in 1995, as Director of the western division of the Montevideo municipality) over a period of 15 years. Originally trained as a teacher, Olivera joined the Tupamaro guerilla movement and consequently spent several years in self-exile in Cuba, where she joined the Communist Party. Returning to Uruguay in 1985 she affiliated herself with the Communist Party in Montevideo and began her political career. In her position in MIDES, Olivera has played an integral part in implementing many of the FA's social policies, often in a hands-on manner that has made her popular in many of Montevideo's neighborhoods. Additionally, as at least one of the papers noted approvingly, she travels to work by bus and continues to teach high school French in order to "keep her feet on the ground."

Comment

¶11. (SBU) The FA's internal organization is complicated, and coalition leaders often mention the need to revamp it. It is possible that the goings-on detailed above will provide additional impetus. Much will depend on how well Olivera does in the election. In the meantime, FA leaders are cautioning Martinez to be patient, noting that there will likely be a cabinet posting for him in the coming years. End Comment.
Nelson